

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL**

**ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF LOWELL, MA:
MAKING, REMAKING, AND REMAKING AGAIN**

INFORMANT: IVETTE NIEVES [PUERTO RICO]

INTERVIEWER: CHRISTOPH STROBEL; YINGCHAN ZHANG

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S = CHRISTOPH STROBEL

N = IVETTE NIEVES

Z = YINGCHAN ZHANG

Tape 08.33

S: If you could just quickly state your name, your residency, and your ethnic background.

N: My name is Ivette Nieves. I live on Bridge Street. I lived in Lowell for fifteen, sixteen years. I'm Puerto Rican.

Z: How did you end up in Lowell.

N: I was raised in Puerto Rico I came here when I was seventeen and finished my school here. I studied at Lowell High School.

Z: So what did you do after graduation?

N: I got training here and there. I went to Middlesex College.... did kind of office work...front desk... nursing assistant, teacher assistant, many things, I worked for (House Hope?) for eleven years as an associate manager.

Z: So you work here now?

N: Yes I work here. CASEY family services, over seven years already, after I finished working at (House Hope?). I have a good background working with people and families, that's my role here.

S: Can you give us a quick summary of what you do?

N: I'm a Parent Aid. I engage with families who need assistance. I help kids with school, education, kids who are struggling with behavior at school. I go with their parents to school and help them out. Some of the parents, they have a lot of economic problems, and they don't necessarily know how to interact with schools. I offer resources and can refer people. That's part of my job. I do a lot of outreach in the community. I engage a lot of people in groups, especially adults. I try to bring people out of their houses and get community participation.

S: What are some of the issues that you have in your dealings with the school?

N: Because we are the minority there are issues of racism and we dealing with a lot of peer pressure issues. It's difficult sometimes because some of the parents they don't have the language skills and they struggle to communicate with teachers and principals in school. They don't find support in school, or they don't know how to engage at the schools because of language barriers. It's part of my job to help parents to find a point person, to get them to engage. I've been having problems in getting the support and keeping the support. Usually when you have a point person in school... there can be lay offs due to lack of funding or grants.... There is a struggle. I deal mostly with behavioral problems. I deal with kids that are in gangs, have issues with crime.....

S: Do you mostly deal with Hispanic kids or kids from all different backgrounds?

N: I'm more engaged in the Latino community because we have a particular lack of participation ... I feel most comfortable doing that. But I help everybody... whoever comes through this door.

S: Do you feel that there are better resources for, say, the Cambodian Community as compared to the Latino Community, or do you not see a difference there?

N: I don't see a difference. What I do feel though is that many Latino will not engage in programs. This can be due to their immigrant status, they don't want people to know that they don't have papers and they are here illegally, but also there is just a lack of information. Also grants that are funding programs are being cut.

Z: You mentioned that when you work with kids you are also trying to figure out what their problems are, can you tell us a little bit about that?

N: I do a little assessment. I meet with the parents first and I find out what their concerns are. Then from there I do a home visit. From there we set up an appointment to go to school and find out what the problem is. And then I put the pieces together family, the kid's attitude, and I try to engage them in counseling groups here. You can usually figure out what is going on.... The problems usually start at home..... The parents don't know how to speak English. The kids are born and raised here, they know the language, and they often don't know how to communicate with their parents. So I have to communicate with the parents. Kids often don't tell their parents about their academic performance or behavioral problems at schools. It is a long process.

S: How many cases do you generally work on?

N: It goes up and down, and everybody is different. Some people they come for different reasons.... I have fifteen cases right now. But it goes up and down. It depends.

S: How would you describe your life in Lowell?

N: That is easy to answer. I just work and go home. [Laughter] I have family all over the country, but I won't move out of Lowell! I have lived all over the city and I feel comfortable here.... You know and you help people, and people get to appreciate you.... Even when I came here for the first time in 1992, I felt good, I felt comfortable, I am not afraid here... I feel comfortable living here. I don't want to leave, I want to stay here. Also my work, I love what I do, I love to work with people, and I think that's what makes me stay here too.

S: It sounds to me like your Latino identity is very important to you? Do you have a community here, businesses, like restaurants and shops? Can you just talk a little bit about that?

N: I would like to stay more active and engaged in the Latino Community.... I see more of it now not less than before. I see more restaurants open, little stores open, especially compared to fifteen years ago. I hope that there will be a little more growth, but I see some growth, and I think that is good. I know there are a lot of people that can do more, but, we are restrained by too many things.

S: Why the restraint? Is it the community? Is it the city? Is it both? What do you think?

N: I think it is us, because we are still not strong enough. We... still don't get together and get the word out. We say we are going to do this, we want to do this, we want to be heard. But we don't do it.

S: The numbers are there in the city... Is one issue maybe that there hasn't been a Latino leadership that has emerged yet?

N: Exactly. Someone to push the issues put the word out no matter what. Given the immigration status of many, there is fear. If you don't have the documentation, how are you going to represent yourself? I think that's part of it.

S: Do you feel that the Latino Community has increased in size since you arrived here.

N: I think it has been stayed about the same.

Z: Do you see an increase in Latino involvement in the city's activities?

N: I see some of it, but not as much as I would like to see. CASEY is running a Latino support group, and we started with five people, and now we are fourteen. I see some growth, but not as I would like to see. It's not much.

Z: You mentioned that some people don't have legal documentation, what do you think are the forces that keep them here, even without the documentations?

N: I think there are personal issues... they just don't have the opportunity to fix their status. There are many people that came here illegally, and they just get a fake Social Security with day of birth and they start working under the table and they feel comfortable with that. It's not much but at least they can support the people that they left behind in their country. They support their family. They don't come here to endanger anybody. They just came here for the work. They just want to work and support their families because in their countries they don't have the same opportunities that we have here. After a while, they love it too much they want to stay. But there is not much help out there to make the situation better, and the government is getting stricter and they get scared.

S: Do you feel that there's a crackdown? Because when we talk to other people in the Latino community, they say that there are more ID checks....

N: It is not a crackdown it is an earthquake. It's terrible. Things that used to be so easily done before are now so difficult.... Getting paperwork done now takes so much longer than it used to....

Z: What kind of activities do Latinos pursue to keep their identity strong?

N: We are trying our best to keep our customs.... We have our parties and celebrations... that way they don't forget where we came from. But sometimes it is difficult... because you get used to living here, and as the years pass, you don't follow these things anymore, you lose all... it is really sad sometimes, to know that you lose things that you've grown up with....

S: What role does language play for you?

N: Repeat that again?

S: What role does language play for you? Hmm in a sense I assume you speak a lot of Spanish at work?

N: Uh huh.

S: Do you have kids or do you plan on having kids?

N: I have kids already, and I have grandsons too. I have four kids and two came to the United States when they were babies. Plus I have two who were born here. All of them speak both languages. They speak English and Spanish in kind of a blurry way, like sometimes you don't understand what they say in Spanish. But they speak Spanish. No matter how much they complained how they didn't like to speak Spanish, when mommy came home they spoke Spanish. My grandson he is Cambodian and Puerto Rican. I love my baby grandson. He's going to speak three languages.... I think it is really important for my kids to keep the language and use it a lot.

S: Do you find that there is pressure from mainstream society for your kids not to not learn Spanish? Do you find that the school is supportive or non-supportive? When I look at the United States, I'm always surprised how much it seems to be "English only." Do you experience that?

N: I noticed that when I came to United State. I felt the pressure to always speak English. I think that was one of the things that pushed me to go to school again. Try to get an education, try to learn the language, and try to be fluent. It was hard. Working at CASEY, I saw a lot of families coming from various countries, speaking various languages, they had to struggle to adapt to the new language and not finding much support. It is difficult when the kids are trying and they don't find much support here. The language is crucial. You live here. You have to speak the language.

S: Do you feel that the schools are doing a good job in providing opportunities to foreign speakers to ease into English? Are there good programs to help with that?

N: The School Department they offer good programs. But families have to be involved in the kids education. If the family is not involved.... Definitely you can find the support, but it also depends on the parents. And the kids too, you want to go forward in life, you need good education. You have to apply yourself.

Z: How did your kids find school?

N: I never had those kinds of problems because my kids started school here. But I work with families whose kids came here at age 12, 13, 14... the pressure is not even from the school, it is from the peers... and if their parents are not involved... they just get lost. They end up in gangs, do crime, do whatever.... Those kids struggle a lot because they don't know the language.

S: Do you observe a lot of intergenerational issues between parents and kids?

N: Just imagine, parents come from Puerto Rico, they have never been to United States, the kid comes from Puerto Rico, never been to United States. Parents are trying to find support and can't find it... the kid won't find it either. So they're lost.

S: And those kids will end up in gangs?

N: Exactly! Just to protect themselves because that's what they are looking for – protection. When they end up in gangs they get involved with crime, they skip school because they don't understand what is going on. So they just walk out of school. That's what I see.

S: What roles does religion play to you personally but also in the Latino community here in the city?

N: It depends on the family, how they raise the kids. I don't see much religion. I really don't see much of an impact.

S: Do a lot of people here support relatives back home financially? You alluded to it earlier.

N: My guess would be seventy-five percent.

S: Wow! In what way does this play itself out?

N: Let me give you a specific example. A woman who came to United States worked here for a couple of years. She got into a car accident, and got benefits. She still supports her family with that public benefit. She goes to food pantries to collect food and clothes, puts them in boxes and sends it to her country, for her family because the income that she receives is not enough to support herself and send it over there; so she collects things and sends packages. People work two or three shifts to send money and to support themselves here. You see that a lot.

S: How, how are you guys funded?

N: We are non-profit agency.

Z: I noticed that the city has made some efforts to provide affordable housing. A large proportion of the Latino Community lives in affordable housing. What are the communities views on these issues?

N: I just left public housing two years ago. When I came to Massachusetts, I was on welfare and with the little money that welfare gives you cannot pay regular rent. It was that or move to a shelter. It is not easy to live on a low income.... The rental market rent is outrageous, and if you come here to work, to support people in your country, support yourself here, that's it, that's what they are looking for, they looking for affordable housing. It is really difficult to get through. I think that's why the first thing many people do is look for affordable housing.

S: Do you find that the opportunities are on the decline? Because a big discussion in the city now is that there is less affordable housing and there is gentrification going on. Do you see that in your work as well?

N: Prices are going up and up. It's crazy. People are looking for affordable housing.... Nevertheless, the way housing is distributed, it should be a little more strategic. They should look into who exactly needs it. I know many, many people who don't need to live in public housing. They live better than me [laughs]. They have four or five people in the family who work. They have a good enough income to pay market rate rent outside [public housing] and could leave the apartment to someone who really needs it. People should be conscientious too. There are people, they may need it for a couple of years, and they would get on their feet, and they got better and they can leave and go.... That is my own experience. I was in Lowell Housing for eleven years. Now my kids are grown up; they are big; they work and they are out. I don't need to live in public housing because I can pay rent now. But I see families they don't move out. They raise their kids, and the kids end up living in housing to raise their kids, and they are still here. That's part of it. It is a cycle, and they just live on. They feel secure. They don't want to leave, because they don't want to try anything else.

Z: Are you registered to vote?

N: Yes.

Z: How about people in the community?

N: We do voter registration every year, before the primaries, for a whole week. We go around and ask people if they are already registered and we register people, a lot of them. It is important because we provide people with the right to vote. We have a lack of participation. Many Latino they don't have the privilege to vote because they are not citizens. We have a lot of people who are residents but they are not allowed to vote because they are not citizens yet. We also run voter education programs, teaching people about the importance of voting, the reason why they should vote, and to create awareness of the process.

S: You have a lot of Latinos, Southeast Asians, Africans, and so on in the city. But when you look at city hall, there is hardly any representation of people of color. How do you feel about that?

N: My dream is that a Latino person will go out and speak, to all the Latinos in the community, explain what voting means, what the impact of their vote is, and why it is important. I would like to see a friendly person when you go to the City Hall to help you find out how you can register in Spanish. I would also like more information available to immigrants in their native languages. I've been helping new voters for four five years now, and I don't see any information. I have to really search for it. Maybe city hall, on voting day, could provide transportation to people who want to vote. Maybe that would be helpful to elderly people and adults who don't vote because they don't have transportation. I'd say we provide seventy percent of the transportation to the voting place....

S: Would you like to see more immigrants on the City Council?

N: I would love to see that!

S: Have you ever gone to any of the museums or had any interaction with the National Park?

N: CASEY has a few programs and we take our kids to the museums here. We went a couple of times with the kids, teaching them about Lowell.

S: Do you feel that the Park is receptive to your efforts? Are there tours in Spanish?

N: I think it really depends. When I bring the kids there are programs for them. But if I bring a group of adults to see the museum, it's not good. I will find nobody there to help them out. I will be the one who has to translate everything. It would be good if they could find a Latino person at the museum, who could explain everything to them in Spanish. That would have an impact.

S: That's definitely a point we shall try to pass on.

S: Thank you so much!

N: You are welcome.